

Boulevard Rebounds



Christmas party at Iceland: "Let's see, I want an Eisenhower jacket, some of those awful-looking baggy pants, and . . ."

by Heather Gould

At a time when the whole country seems to be turning into one big mall, and historians and sociologists are lamenting the loss of regional culture, one need go no farther than North Sacramento to find a unique patch of local, living history.

Del Paso Boulevard, in the heart of strife-ridden Del Paso Heights, shines as a testament to the power of roots and community. The street is populated with a variety of small businesses and people who know each other by name.

Nowhere but here can you view a peep show, then atone for your sin right next door at the Church of the Living God, fill your stomach around the corner at Tony Baloney's Deli and finish off your meal with pie and ice cream at a parlor named Happy Times.

Del Paso Boulevard has a long and rich history, still in evidence, which distinctly flavors the area. This avenue was once the main drag for the city of North Sacramento and a "hub of activity," says Cindy Duarte, 37, a lifelong resident and manager of the family owned Cook's Hardware.

Duarte remembers her high school years, when Friday night options on Del Paso Boulevard included roller skating, ice skating and screenings at two different movie houses. Now, the only entertainment still remaining is ice skating at the 53-year-old Iceland rink. But, while Del Paso

Boulevard may not be the street it once was, it seems to have weathered the worst of its problems and managed to come out intact and ahead.

North Sacramento was once a small bustling town unto itself, a short drive and a world away from the state capitol. In 1964, this community narrowly voted to merge with Sacramento, and, by all accounts, that's when the trouble began.

The Boulevard shines as a testament to the power of roots and community.

"The money disappeared when the city took over," says Chris Lord, owner of Iceland Skating Rink. "Improvements were nil," he states.

That problem still persists today, says Duarte, noting that the city will be replacing the sewers in downtown Sacramento, while doing nothing about this area's equally old and decrepit sewer system. And, as the city began to ignore this area, so did others. Once-grand homes fell into disrepair, businesses left and people followed. In their wake, drugs, gangs and prostitutes moved in. But some, the "die-hards" Duarte calls them, refused

to leave or succumb, and this core community stayed put and dug in. Today, the place is making a comeback with a mix of old businesses and new.

A spirit of tradition does suffuse the street and hold it together. Traveling east from the Del Paso Boulevard exit off Highway 160, one finds the Iceland Skating Rink on the right. The rink offers the only year round skating in Sacramento, attracting 100,000 skaters a year.

The rink opened in 1939 under the ownership of William Kerth, who also owned the American Ice Company, which still sits right next door. (Kerth's son, Rob, was recently elected as the councilman from District 2, which includes North Sacramento.)

Lord, who has owned and operated Iceland since 1981 along with partner Bob Kownacki, first started hanging out in the rink as a teenager in 1963. One day, he was outside the rink when he was hit with a snowball from within. Lord came rushing in, ready "to clean someone's clock. And," he continues, "they put me on a pair of speed skates." Lord says he never amounted to much as an athlete, because he smoked, but he loved to hang out and fool around. A few years later, a rink employee became sick and had to quit. Lord was hired and, atypically in today's revolving-door workplace, has been there ever since.

Lord, whose specific expertise

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The Boulevard

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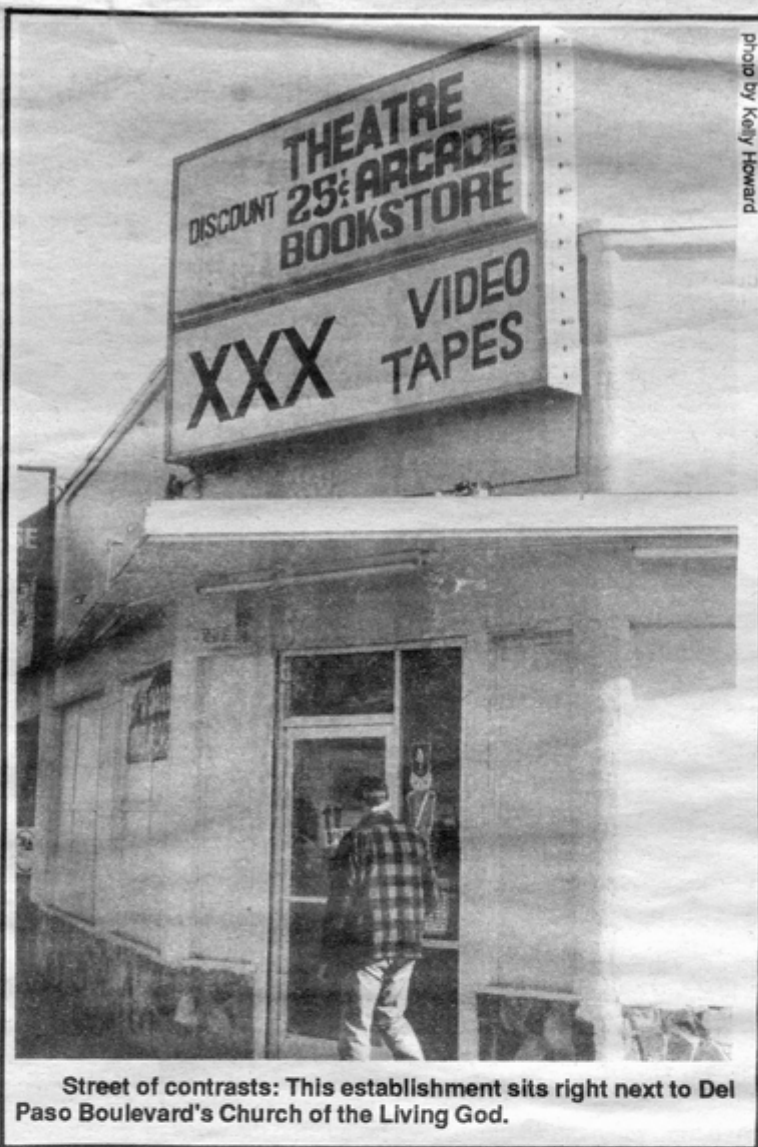
is refrigeration and the mechanics of making ice, has plied his trade for luminaries such as Dorothy Hamill and others at shows around the world. Iceland, though, is where Lord would like to remain, keeping the ice smooth and piping in music to skate by. Although he has lost some money on the rink and barely scrapes by these days, Lord's goal has always been "keeping skating in Sacramento going one way or another."

Further on down Del Paso Boulevard, past Nor Cal Lab Supplies, stands Cook's Hardware, a cornucopia of household and yard wares, including televisions, videos, detergents and even a post office. The Cooks, Roscoe and Susie, first went into business on this street in 1936, as Cook's Service Station, according to granddaughter Duarte. Duarte's other grandfather, Henry Miller, was once the mayor of North Sacramento. Duarte grew up in Cook's Hardware and three of her four siblings and her eightysomething grandmother still work there. Most other employees have been around a minimum of 20 years. "It's a real family business," says Duarte while watching her nephew try to wriggle out of a pair of toy handcuffs.

Newcomer to the area is Ray Torres, owner of the just-opened Happy Times ice cream parlor at the corner of Del Paso and El Camino. Over the years, this turn-of-the-century building, originally the Old Del Paso Hotel, had degenerated into a house of ill repute, a prime haven for prostitutes. Three years ago, Torres began renovating the building. In addition to Happy Times, the building houses the upscale Gabriel's Bridal Fashions and the Sacramento Children's Medical Clinic, and is the future home of Sacramento Preventive Dental Care. Both the dental and children's clinics provide low-cost health care. Torres managed to do all this with the help of a low interest loan from the Redevelopment Agency, which has designated the strip a commercial redevelopment zone.

Part of Del Paso Boulevard's rejuvenation can be attributed to specific programs which encourage investment in the area. The Redevelopment Agency provides grants and money for acquisition and rehabilitation of buildings if merchants choose to move in on the street. One program is known as facade repair. If business owners choose to spruce up the exterior of their building, the agency will pay half their costs, provided their plans meet certain architectural standards.

The state has also designated the strip an "enterprise zone." Shops and other businesses which locate here will receive tax credits and be given priority on



Street of contrasts: This establishment sits right next to Del Paso Boulevard's Church of the Living God.

state contracts.

The undisputed king of Del Paso Boulevard is Joe Holloway, owner of Lil Joe's Steak House. The God-fearing Holloway has been blessing his customers with cheap steak dinners for four decades on the boulevard. Del Paso Boulevard was "always a good boulevard," says Holloway. "It's one mile long and 50 feet wide, not crooked. Lovely people and lovely merchants," he proudly proclaims.

Holloway also believes in the supremacy of God, as he blesses all who come to the restaurant he has operated for 39 years. Holloway's concern is definitely the little man; he offers a complete steak dinner for \$3.99, so "everyone can afford it, even in the recession." Holloway has raised his complete meal price by only \$2 since opening in 1953.

Almost every person passing by, from vagrants to professionals, stops in the doorway to greet Holloway, in his trademark red chef's hat. Holloway's importance in the neighborhood can be understood by noting that the gangs have a standing rule of leaving Holloway, his eatery and his employees alone. "Everyone respects Joe and worries about him," says waitress Mary Lou Donelson.

Del Paso Boulevard is no Champs Elysees, though. Empty storefronts, a few weedy lots and

a population of street people give the place some grit. Even Holloway admits the street could use a "few newcomers and a nice building" or two.

Well, while Del Paso Boulevard will probably never be stately and imposing (and probably wouldn't want to be), some help is on the way. "Art on the Boulevard" is the name of a new project headed by Bill Farrell of the North Sacramento Chamber of Commerce. The highly unusual concept being proposed is to have various community groups—churches, schools and clubs—each paint a door in a way which characterizes their organization. The doors will then be bracketed onto the boulevard's median strip.

The point, says Farrell, is to highlight the "ethnic and cultural diversity" of North Sacramento. (The area has one of the highest minority populations in the city.) The idea is based on a similar project implemented at the nearby Junction School. Farrell hopes for a formal unveiling of the doors by the end of January.

Also, says Farrell, the Chamber of Commerce is trying to get an "adopt an island" plan underway. It has already hired a landscape architect to design a plan for greening up the islands which make up Del Paso Boulevard's

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